

When I heard that Merle Haggard was going to play the Keswick Theatre just outside Philadelphia, I knew I had to go. I'm a firm believer in seeing the greats as many times as possible and at 78, and a lung cancer survivor, it is possible he might not make it to this side of the country again. I've been listening to Merle Haggard since the late '60s, saw him the first time in the early '70s, and have seen him at least once every decade since, and sometimes a lot more than that. Haggard is not only one of the truly great songwriters in country music (and as far as I'm concerned, one of the great songwriters period), but he is one of the great traditionalists, and has paid tribute in albums devoted to such artists as Jimmie Rodgers, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys and Lefty Frizzell as well as exploring New Orleans blues, gospel music and bluegrass. His band, The Strangers has long been one of the best if not the best band in all of country music.

In the Keswick Parking lot, there were three tour busses, two together and one standing alone that said "Super Chief" on the side. In the crowded theater lobby, the lines were long at the souvenir stand. I didn't see any t-shirts as nice as the one I bought in the '70s though I kind of had my eye on "The Fightin' Side of Me/If you don't love it, leave it" t-shirt which I thought would be fun to have. Our seats were reasonably close to the stage as the show started with a short set from Haggard's son, Noel, the seats to my right and directly in front of me were vacant. Sometime during the first song, a loud-mouthed woman took the seat next to me, immediately pulling out her cell phone, first to post to Facebook and then to look at the concert. She was seated a couple of minutes when the hats sat down in front of us. Wide brimmed straw hats and the one who didn't have a hat was some hyper active human fossil type incapable of sitting still who constantly clapped loudly and out of time. I attract these people like a magnet. I managed to endure it by focusing on what the band was doing instead, and a couple of songs in I realized the keyboard player who was kind of in the shadows at the opposite end of the stage was Floyd Domino, the original piano player for Asleep At The Wheel.

During the intermission, I discussed the band's dynamics as well as their equipment which included several tan Fender bassman amps with my buddy Mike, wondering which instruments which weren't touched on the first set would be used.

The intermission lasted exactly 15 minutes and The Strangers took the stage with an additional member, a sax player and launched into the speeded up swing instrumental of "Okie From Muskogee" as Haggard took the stage and strapped on his Telecaster. Then they went into "Big City" which possibly was because they were near one. For the next 95 minutes Haggard played song after song alternating between classic hits and more recent material, playing more than 20 songs. If Haggard's illness had affected the power of his voice, it was only slight, though sound wise, I

thought his vocals could be turned up a couple of notches though at some point during the show it stopped bothering me and the balance between the instruments and voice was pretty close to perfect.

The Strangers are not a loud band, but they know how to bring it up when they have to. There is only one original Stranger left, pedal steel and dobro player Norman Hamlet who at 80 is playing better than ever. The lead guitar spot, one held by one of the greatest guitarists in any genre, the late Roy Nichols is now held by Haggard's youngest son Ben. Scott Joss who played fiddle, but also electric mandolin and acoustic guitar also excelled as did sax player Renato Caranto, and Floyd Domino is one of the great piano players in country music. The rhythm section of Taras Prodaniuk on electric bass and Jim Christie on drums were responsible for a lot of dynamics with Christie particularly effective. The thing is despite the various changes in the band, they sounded like The Strangers. While many studio versions of Haggard's songs, particularly the earlier ones have these maximum punch abbreviated half a verse guitar solos, in concert depending on the song, Haggard likes to stretch things out. No slouch on guitar himself, he took several leads, but solos and generously handed around and quite often there are twin parts and subtle shifts in rhythm and which instrument provides emphasis.

Haggard does not work off a set list. He simply goes out and plays what he feels like singing and playing at the time. It could be a cover such as "Folsom Prison Blues," or "Troubled In Mind," an instrumental like "Fat Boy Rag," or an album cut that wasn't necessarily a hit. At the Keswick, I thought the more recent songs, quite a few of them slow and sad, such as "If Only I Could Fly" "A Hundred Years From Now," and the brand new "Unfair Weather Friend" were the most effective. Yet he also delivered more than memorable readings of "Silver Wings," "The Bottle Let Me Down," "Mama Tried" and "Sing Me Back Home."

Haggard also to the surprise of some included "The Fightin' Side of Me" which got the hyperactive guy in front of me really excited. Haggard dedicated it to "our soldiers" and I was hoping he'd follow it up with "America First" which includes the line, "Let's get out of Iraq an' get back on the track."

The show ended with "Okie From Muskogee" which has been closing Haggard shows for decades. Haggard, who's been known to consume copious amounts of pot doesn't take the song as seriously as some of his fans. He messed up one of the verses and changed another and there's some who claim the whole thing was a joke that got out of hand. Still the hyperactive guy was clapping wildly along and the woman next to me was shouting/singing in some key that can't be found in any music book.

The band then glided into the speeded up Okie instrumental they started the show with as Haggard waved good bye and some guy who was probably his road manager took to the stage to remind everyone to buy more albums and CDs, announcing they were already out of the brand new one with Willie Nelson, but saying what stores had it, as people filed out.

And if Merle Haggard returns, I'll go see him again.

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